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The Worldwide Success of Russian Propaganda

A couple of decades ago, as I walked through the stacks of the Baillieu Library at the University of Melbourne, a serious-looking tome with the embossed title *The Crimean War* caught my eye. Published in 1860, the book's central thesis was that the Crimean War of 1853 to 1856 should now be regarded as an unfortunate interlude in the friendship between the British and Russian empires. The modern phrase to describe it would be: "Let's have another reset, shall we?"

As I flicked through the book, written by a female Russian author, a jarring phrase immediately jumped out at me. The Russian empire deserved Britain's sympathy, the author argued, as it had in the past been "ravaged by the Zaporogues". This was how the English transliteration of a reference to Ukrainian Zaporozhian Cossacks fighting for their freedom was rendered. A clever wordplay that imparts a negative image of Ukrainians, I thought.

Whilst the Russian armed forces were once optimistically touted as number two in the world, in propaganda and deception, *maskerovka* as it is called, Russia is undoubtedly number one. It is said that stories of portable villages erected by Catherine the Great's lover Prince Grigory Potemkin to give the impression of a prosperous empire as her barge floated down the Dnipro River are largely fiction. But that was a long time ago.

There can be no doubt that in 1933, as 3.5 to 4 million Ukrainians starved to death in the Holodomor, the French politician Edouard Herriot was duped by Moscow into declaring: "I have crossed Ukraine. I assure you that I saw it as a garden in full yield, a beautiful garden with black and fertile grounds covered on considerable expanses by magnificent harvests."

In 2014, an ethnic Russian actress, identified at one point as "Tatiana Samoilenko", donned alternating clothes, wigs and hairstyles to present herself as at least five different people, including "a soldier's mother" in Kyiv, a "housewife" in Odessa, and an "Anti-Maidan resident" of Kharkiv draped in a Russian flag. In the absence of a groundswell of pro-Russian feeling in eastern and southern Ukraine in 2014, her various television performances helped create the false impression of one. Once the Crimean Peninsula had been invaded and secured by Russian troops, she told US journalist Simon Ostrovsky of *Vice News*: "It's about time Ukrainians smelled a Russian boot on their necks again."

Regarding Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, many in the West, including some who are firmly anti-Putin, have unwittingly adopted false Kremlin narratives due to the relentless, repetitive Russian propaganda. For example, before Russia's full-scale invasion, in January 2022, *Time Magazine* published a photograph of a Russian armoured vehicle with the caption: "Voters on the autonomous Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea voted overwhelmingly yesterday to secede from their country and join Russia."

Not only did this show that some journalists at *Time* still have no idea of what happened on the peninsula in 2014, but also that they had not even bothered to change the caption from the one they had presumably used back in 2014 (when it actually *was* "yesterday"). The same assertion about "a large percentage of the Crimean population [having] supported the referendum to leave Ukraine" has also been made by Australian commentators.

Such views are not correct. In 1991, just over 90 per cent of Ukrainians voted for independence in a referendum. In the Crimean oblast 54 per cent voted for Ukraine's independence (57 per cent in the oblast's largest regional city, Sevastopol). In 2010 the secessionist pro-Russian party run by the shady Sergey "the Goblin" Aksyonov, who the Russian occupation regime later installed as the region's leader, could muster only 5 per cent of the votes, and one seat in the 100-seat regional Crimean parliament.

Last year Yale University's Timothy Snyder wrote that the "referendums" held then in four occupied south-eastern provinces were just as fake as the one held in the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Apart from voters having no access to Ukrainian or

international media, he wrote: "On the day, they had to choose, in good Orwellian fashion, between two options, both of which amounted to the annexation of Crimea by Russia." Even so, Snyder continued: "According to internal information of the Russian presidential administration, less than a third of eligible voters turned up, and the vote split between the two options."

With respect to the Russian motivation for invading Ukraine in 2014, numerous commentators, including some on the Right in Australia, have repeated the Kremlin narrative that the Russians were simply reacting to "the western-backed coup to bring down the democratically elected, pro-Russian regime in Kyiv in February 21-22, 2014". On the *World Socialist Web Site* we also find authors writing about the "Svoboda and Right Sector [which] played a crucial role in the February 22 coup in Kiev, [and] which was strongly backed by Berlin and Washington".

Russian propagandists' view that the 2014 Maidan Revolution was a "coup" has not only been promoted by the Kremlin, but also by well-known Western academics like John T. Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago. This view implies that not only was it a "Western-backed coup" that "usurped power", but also one that was staged by "neo-nazis and the far right". The "democratically elected, pro-Russian president" part of this narrative is meant to suggest that President Yanukovych was elected by "pro-Russians" who by definition were the majority of voters, while the "far-right" Maidan "coup plotters" represented a minority regime that was illegitimate. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Like most conspiracy theories, most propaganda is based on a thread of "fact" from which an absurd alternative reality is spun. In his 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article Mearsheimer asserted that while "the full extent of US involvement has not yet come to light, it is clear that Washington backed the coup". The "evidence" he cited was the fact that US diplomat Victoria Nuland "had advocated regime change and wanted the Ukrainian politician Arseniy Yatseniuk to become prime minister in the new government, which he did". This was the infamous "Nuland–Pyatt phone call" that was intercepted and leaked by Russia's FSB.

At that time I too thought Yatseniuk was the natural choice for prime minister. Would my opinion make it a "coup" backed by me? What Mearsheimer overlooks is that in Ukraine the prime minister is

effectively a public servant who is directed by the president. The Nuland–Pyatt call did not muse about who their pick for president would be, and in any case the newly elected President Petro Poroshenko dismissed Yatseniuk after a year and a half, replacing him with his own man, Volodymyr Hroysman. Hence, the private thoughts of Nuland, the then US ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt and myself were as irrelevant to the future course of Ukrainian politics as they were to the origins and course of the Maidan Revolution.

That US academics like John Mearsheimer and some Australian political commentators cannot accept what actually happened in Kyiv in 2014 is a tribute to the power of Russian propaganda. It is also a reflection of their ignorance or misunderstanding of the intricacies of Ukrainian politics and society since independence. Viktor Yanukovych won the presidency in 2010 on a platform of taking Ukraine to the European Union, but as he enriched his own family and his cronies through large-scale corruption, the deal offered by the corrupt Putin regime held far more appeal to him. It required neither transparency nor application of the rule of law.

When Yanukovych announced he was reneging on the EU deal, Mustafa Nayeem, an Afghan-born Russian-speaking Ukrainian investigative journalist, was the first to raise the alarm. Through a post on his Facebook account that night, November 21, 2013, Nayeem drew some two thousand concerned Kyivans to the central Maidan square to protest. That initial demonstration attracted students to the Maidan, who occupied it. The Yanukovych government's brutal dispersal of those peaceful students by the Berkut riot police in the middle of the night on November 30 drew a massive response from their parents and Ukrainian society at large. Many see that night as the start of the revolution, a response to Yanukovych breaking the social contract with his people.

In the book *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution*, and in Lecture 20 of Timothy Snyder's Ukrainian history course (also on YouTube), Yale University's associate professor of intellectual history Marci Shore describes her interactions with some of those students, and the parents who themselves joined the revolution out of outrage over Yanukovych's lawlessness. It snowballed from there. The occupiers of the Maidan square were many and

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varied, reflecting all segments of Ukrainian society, from intellectuals at one end of the spectrum, to some members of far-Right at the other. They included people who had voted against Yanukovych, but also many people who had voted for him and who felt betrayed.

As the revolution progressed, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators came to the square, but there formed a hard core of protesters who organised into approximately forty-five "companies" armed with clubs, shields and helmets to fight off the Berkut police. One of those companies was made up solely of Jewish Ukrainians (four of whom were later killed by Yanukovych's snipers). Notably, over the three months of the revolution, as thousands of protesters took shelter from the cold in the underground shopping mall below the Maidan, not a single store was looted.

In Professor Mearsheimer's "27 million views on YouTube" lecture which has been promoted by Russian bots and features on the websites of Russian embassies, he inexplicably skips over the period when "the coup" was alleged to have occurred by simply stating that "there's killing on the Maidan and as a result Yanukovych flees for his life to Russia". This overlooks the fact that the legitimacy of Yanukovych's presidency had completely eroded during the revolution, with the last straw being the shooting of more than 100 demonstrators as well as the deaths of several riot police.

At the end of that brutal day of February 21, 2014, the agreement that had been struck between Yanukovych, three representatives of the demonstrators and three EU foreign ministers was rejected by the body of demonstrators. That night Yanukovych fled by helicopter to Hostmel airport (which during February 24 to 26, 2022, was the scene of a critical battle for control of the airport against elite Russian paratroopers) where he boarded a plane. Later it was established that vans loaded with Yanukovych's valuables had begun to remove them from his compound three days earlier (February 19).

At the time he fled Kyiv, Yanukovych was in technical command of the government and security structures of the country. No restless colonels had taken control of the army. In fact, the Ukrainian army had been absent throughout the revolution, maintaining the principled position that its task was to defend the country from external enemies and that it was not to be used as the government's instrument to suppress its own people.

Over the next few days, the Rada (Parliament) met in emergency session. Nineteen members of Yanukovych's Regions Party resigned, effectively crossing the floor. Every one of the 328 assembled MPs voted to remove Yanukovych from his position, citing his abandonment of his post. While this was 73 per cent of the 450 deputies and did not reach the 75 per cent threshold or match the conditions specified for impeachment, this was an extraordinary and unforeseen circumstance and the parliament had to act quickly to maintain order in the country. Some of the missing MPs were corrupt Yanukovych supporters who had also fled to Russia.

Three months later Petro Poroshenko won the presidential election with a first-round absolute majority of 54.7 per cent, his closest rival being Yulia Tymoshenko with 12.8 per cent. That election was strictly monitored by a large number of international observers and effectively served as the Ukrainian people's referendum on the Maidan Revolution and Yanukovych's ouster.

To understand why the Kremlin's propaganda narrative applies the term "coup" rather than "revolution" to describe the events in Kyiv in February 2014 one need only to look at the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s descriptions of these terms: "The chief prerequisite for a coup is the control of all or part of the armed forces, the police, and other military elements." This contrasts with "a revolution, which is usually achieved by a large number of people working for basic social, economic, and political change". A coup is an illegitimate seizure of power that is hardly ever followed by democracy.

Millions of Ukrainians all over the country took part in what they call their "Revolution of Dignity" against a regime that had lost its legitimacy. The post-Yanukovych interim government had no control of the armed forces or police until after he had fled, and after parliament had met to appoint an interim government. How Professor Mearsheimer and those who repeat his "US-backed coup" story cannot see this was a broad revolution of Ukrainian society is as puzzling as Russian propaganda is pervasive.

In 2014 the Kremlin narrative that a "neo-nazi coup" had taken place in Kyiv was even implied in the *Guardian* by our own former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, who had taken advice on the matter from Seumas Milne, a Putin Valdai Club member and Jeremy Corbyn's communications director. There and in some subsequent Australian discussions about the Maidan Revolution it has been claimed that the West has "once again chosen some unsavoury partners". Did Fraser or subsequent commentators ever actually look at the composition of the first Yatseniuk government and what happened to it?

If they had they would have discovered that of nineteen ministerial positions in the first Yatseniuk government: Yatseniuk's People's Front Party held

four ministries (including Prime Minister and Internal Affairs), Yulia Tymoshenko's Batkivshchyna Party had three ministries (including First Vice Prime Minister, Justice and Infrastructure), the Poroshenko Bloc had two (including Health and Vice Prime Minister Regional Development), and seven ministries were held by politically unaffiliated professional people (including a colonel-general as Defence Minister, an actor as Culture Minister, a university president as Education Minister). The far-Right Svoboda ("Freedom") Party held three ministries, including one of the Vice Prime Minister positions (Humanitarian Policy), Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Barely five months after the government's formation the Svoboda Party exited the coalition that had been established as a unity government pending fresh presidential and parliamentary elections. The Svoboda Party had virtually zero electoral support in Ukraine until Yanukovych came to power in 2010 and was reportedly clandestinely supported by Yanukovych as a bogeyman for his largely Russophone constituency. In the 2012 elections Svoboda captured a record 10.45 per cent of the vote (thirty-seven MPs), which was still below or far below the far-Right vote in several EU countries.

Importantly, in the December 2014 parliamentary elections, the Svoboda Party's support slumped to 4.71 per cent (six MPs) and after Volodymyr Zelenskyy's record (73 per cent) win in 2019, the subsequent parliamentary election saw Svoboda's vote plummet further to 2.16 per cent (one MP). Since 2014 Svoboda has been a non-entity in Ukraine.

Upon dismissing Yatseniuk, President Poroshenko's choice as Prime Minister was Volodymyr Hroysman, the first Jew to hold that position. Poroshenko subsequently lost the presidency to Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose Jewish ancestry was visible to all voters. Recently Zelenskyy shared Iftar with Ukrainian Muslim soldiers during Ramadan; Ukraine's current Minister of Defence, Oleksii Reznikov, is also Jewish. The idea of a "Russian fight against neo-nazi Ukraine" that is promoted by the Kremlin and repeated by some Western observers is an absurdity of the highest order.

The power of deep Russian propaganda lies not only in repetition, but repetition over many decades. One of the most pervasive propaganda ploys of the period since the Second World War has been the assertion that "26 [or 27] million Russians died fighting Nazi Germany for us [Westerners]". During one Australian discourse after the 2014 invasions, it was added that "three divisions of Ukrainians invaded the Soviet Union together with the Germans and killed Russians, which they don't

forget". Both propositions are absurd.

The number of Soviet war dead rose from Stalin's (1946) under-estimate of 7 million through Khrushchev's (1965) 20 million to Brezhnev's "more than 20 million" to the current Russian authorities' figure of 26.6 million. However, as Professor Snyder noted in his 2017 Bundestag speech titled "Germany's Historical Responsibility for Ukraine", most of the fighting took place in Ukraine and Belarus, and so 3 million civilian inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine and 3.5 million Ukrainian soldiers serving in the Red Army died because Hitler's primary war objective was to conquer and colonise Ukraine. Moreover: "In absolute numbers, more inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine die in the Second World War than inhabitants of Soviet Russia—in absolute terms—and these are calculations of Russian historians." Snyder noted that everyone—Russians, Ukrainians, Belorusians, Crimean Tartars—had elements who collaborated with the Germans, and whilst "more Ukrainian communists collaborated with the Germans than did Ukrainian nationalists":

> More Ukrainians died on the allied side than French [in the Second World War]. More Ukrainians fought and died on the allied side than British. More Ukrainians fought and died on the allied side than Americans. More Ukrainians fought and died on the allied side than French, British and Americans put together.

There was one Ukrainian Waffen-SS division (the thread of fact), whose formation in 1943 was opposed by the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists. But due to Russian propaganda, knowledge about that single division is far more widespread than the fact, noted in an appendix to Norman Davies's *Europe: A History*, that there were forty-eight Waffen SS divisions, almost half of which were non-German, including: four Hungarian, two Italian, two Latvian, two Norwegian and Danish, one French, one Albanian, one Estonian, one Bosnian, one Flemish, and one Walloon. Why has virtually no one ever heard of them?

Whilst often repeating Kremlin-implanted anti-Ukrainian narratives about the Second World War, almost no one these days seems to know that at the famed Battle of Stalingrad, the approximately 400,000 Hungarians, Italians and Romanians who died fighting for Nazi Germany were roughly equal to the number of Germans who died there, or that according to Snyder, "more French soldiers fought on the axis side than on the allied side". The last was well appreciated by the Second AIF veteran I sat next to at a dinner commemorating the sixtieth

anniversary of D-Day—he was shot in the head by a Vichy bullet in Syria and taken prisoner by the French.

Given these statistics it is concerning that recently the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, referred to today's Ukrainian Army as the "children and grandchildren of the Ukrainians who fought Stalin and Zhukov for ten years from 1945 to 1955", when clearly the vast majority are the children or grandchildren of Ukrainians who served in the Red Army in the Second World War and were instrumental (again with massive assistance from the US) in defeating Nazi Germany on the Eastern Front. This is another example of a Kremlin narrative that has even crept into the language of America's top general.

A number of Western commentators passionately and with the regularity of the Kremlin Tower's clock repeat the narratives of Putin's regime. It is straightforward to understand the motivation of far-Left writers: they cannot get past their constraining paradigm, which holds that "fascist forces" are currently justifying the US's "imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine and the drive towards another world war". The anti-Ukraine position of former SBS presenter Mary Kostakidis can similarly be put down to an anti-US/anti-West conviction that obscures the reality of Russia's imperialist genocidal war on Ukraine.

A more interesting question is what unites the *World Socialist Web Site* and Katrina vanden Heuvel's left-wing *Nation,* which has published numerous anti-Ukraine articles, with some conservatives, like the English journalist Peter Hitchens, who writes for the *Mail on Sunday*?

In a 2013 lecture at Bristol University titled "Why I Like Putin", Peter Hitchens spoke of the friends he made in Moscow, and while he did not "condone all his methods" he admired Putin for pursuing an independent foreign policy that thumbed its nose at US hegemony. What Hitchens admires most about Russia is its strict adherence to "the principle of national sovereignty", which needs to be defended everywhere, and thereby:

> Vladimir Putin is not just defending it in his own country. In Syria and the Middle East he is saying this idea that you can intervene in someone else's country because you don't like its regime is one that is wrong, dangerous and should be opposed.

On some topics, like the invasion of Iraq, I find myself in agreement with Hitchens, but why does he act as an apologist for Putin whilst protesting

that he cannot be called one simply because he denounces the 2022 invasion as a "stupid move"? Why does he invoke the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia when it comes to Iraq and Syria, but not when it comes to Ukraine? The answer I suspect lies in a "capture" that dates from the two and a half years in the tumultuous early 1990s that Hitchens spent in Moscow as a correspondent witnessing the last days of the Soviet Union. Most revealing is Hitchens' statement during his 2013 lecture that:

> One of the troubles with liking Russia is you become, as I have, as much as I am a British patriot, something of a Great Russian Chauvinist. I don't myself believe that the borders which Russia was forced at the end of the Cold War were just borders, or correct borders, or sustainable borders ... Stalin's Russia reversed Brest-Litovsk. Putin's Russia will reverse what happened in 1991.

That was after Russia's two brutal massacres of Chechnya, its invasion of Georgia, and on the eve of the Maidan Revolution and the first Russian invasions of Ukraine. It is noteworthy that Hitchens did not mention "NATO expansion" once in a one-and-a-half-hour lecture about Russia and its place in the world's geopolitical framework. Rather he saw the driving force for the reversal of "what happened in 1991" to be the "unjust borders", which was the key message in Putin's "Great Russian Chauvinist" article of July 2021 in which he asserted that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people". Since the full-scale invasion, that theme has also been promoted in numerous Russian state television appearances by Kremlin propagandists, who regularly call for the destruction of Ukrainians as a people.

In this sense Peter Hitchens understood Putin better than Stephen F. Cohen, who talked about "NATO expansion" prior to 2014. Andrei Ilarionov understands Putin better than either of them. Putin's chief economic adviser between 2000 and 2005, in 2014 Ilarionov was a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. That year he told a NATO audience in Vilnius that as early as 2003 Putin had declared it was intolerable that Kyiv, in Putin's view the "cradle of Russian civilisation", and "Sevastopol, where [he erroneously asserted] St Volodymyr accepted Christianity" should lie outside the Russian state.

Ilarionov considered this historical perspective, rather than any "perceived threat from NATO expansion", to be Putin's actual primary motivator in 2014. Early in February 2014 Ilarionov had correctly predicted an impending Russian invasion, that is, almost three weeks before the invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, and while Yanukovych

was still president. In Vilnius he foreshadowed that the Ukrainian territories Russia occupied that year would not be the end of it.

In the same breath as he denounces the brutality of Russia's full-scale invasion, Peter Hitchens takes every opportunity to present the Zelenskyy government as illegitimate, drawing a line from the alleged "Western backed coup" of 2014. He has also frequently repeated Kremlin narratives about "Ukrainian corruption", the presence of "neo-nazis", and the need for a halt in the supply of Western weapons to Ukraine.

Peter Hitchens is far from the only Westerner to have been captured by the "Russian World" (*Russkyi Mir*) viewpoint after a long stay in Moscow. In April this year Tony Kevin, who was posted to Moscow as a diplomat from 1969 to 1971 and later served as Australia's ambassador to Cambodia and Poland, also asserted that the "US-supported *coup d'etat*" in February 2014 "brought to power fanatical extreme Ukrainian nationalists—sometimes called Ukrainian Nazis". According to Kevin, Putin was forced to invade Ukraine in 2022 after the Ukrainian Army, which was surrounded on three sides by far superior Russian forces, decided to provoke him by indiscriminately shelling the Donbas region and preparing an invasion of its own country. You cannot be more "Kremlin playbook".

Mary Dejevsky, a columnist for the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, was a Moscow correspondent at the same time Hitchens was. They formed the affirmative team in a recent debate on the proposition, "Now is the time to make peace in Ukraine." Opposing them were Edward Lucas, a former senior editor at the *Economist* and also a former Moscow correspondent and Svitlana Morenets, a journalist with the *Spectator* in London.

In a 2018 interview with the ABC, Mary Dejevsky assured listeners that Putin was not seeking to "revive the Soviet Empire". Ironically, she was right in a way, as he wants a "revived Russian Empire" in which there would be no "Ukrainian SSR" and no "Ukrainians". Dejevsky went on to praise Putin for "using his political capital" to raise the retirement age in Russia, which would make things easier "for his successor". Like Mearsheimer and Hitchens, Dejevsky and Kostakidis assured us that Russia would not launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and any such suggestions were "Western scaremongering".

In such a world the "alternative facts" presented by Russia Today are positioned to seem like merely another version of events that should be given equal consideration.

Hitchens, vanden Heuvel and her late husband Professor Stephen F. Cohen have all made much of the topic of "Ukrainian corruption". "Corruption" also happens to be an important theme for Moscow to sow doubt in Western minds about the wisdom of transferring billions of dollars of military equipment and billions in humanitarian aid into the hands of corrupt officials.

Exhibit one in this case is the outstanding performance of Ukraine's armed forces in the Battle of Kyiv, the Battle of Kharkiv and the Battle of Kherson. The defeat of numerically superior Russian forces was achieved by a combination of superior strategy and increasingly through the application of superior Western weapons. It also reflects the fact that corruption is a far bigger problem in Russia than in Ukraine—one Russian general reportedly committed suicide after discovering his reserve tanks did not exist. Exhibit two is the fact that the fundamental goal of the Maidan Revolution was not to oust a "pro-Russian president" as Kremlin propaganda and almost all Western observers continue to assert, but to oust a "massively corrupt Ukrainian president".

While some gains were made under Poroshenko, like the Prozorro ("Transparent") online public electronic procurement system for state and municipal purchases and tenders, it was not enough for Ukrainian society. Their disappointment resulted in Volodymyr Zelenskyy's resounding electoral victory of 2019, with the twin mandates of completing the fight against corruption and ending the war with Russia in the Donbas. It is also worth noting that through large-scale corruption Russia now has one of the most uneven income distributions in the world, while Ukraine has one of the flattest (its Gini Coefficient being lower than Australia's).

Russian propaganda also works on an *ad hoc* basis, often in response to particular crises that Moscow wishes to distract attention from, by creating confusion and doubt. There are still journalists and political analysts in Australia and elsewhere who will write, "Ukrainian separatists accidentally shot down Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014, killing 298 people including 38 Australians." The item of disinformation in that sentence is the reference to "Ukrainian separatists", first because the people it refers to were not "separatists" but active or passive collaborators with the Russian occupation forces, and second because those people were

incapable of operating a Buk missile system.

Media and analysts continue to present this false version that deflects blame from Russia even though in May 2018 the Joint Investigation Team in the Netherlands determined the plane was downed by the Russian Army's 53rd Brigade, part of the Russian 20th Guards Army, which had been discovered earlier by Elliot Higgins's Bellingcat open-source investigators.

When MH17 was brought down, one of the Kremlin's key alternative narratives was that a Ukrainian jet did it. At a roadside cafe in Bordertown, South Australia, I was looked in the eye by a truckie who told me: "But I reckon it was the Ukrainian jet that shot down MH17." Conspiracy theory seems far more elegant than Occam's Razor, even if the fragmentation pattern on the wreckage could not be simulated with an air-to-air missile.

Apart from a poorly executed fake "satellite photograph" purporting to show a vapour trail of a "missile" from a Su-25 jet fighter to a commercial airliner, the Kremlin's primary "proof" of the "Ukrainian jet did it" myth was the testimony of "Carlos the air-traffic controller". Allegedly a Spaniard working at Kyiv airport, "Carlos" was interviewed with his face blurred on Russia Today and his story received wide coverage in the world media in 2014. It later emerged that no such person had ever worked at Kyiv airport. Then in 2018 Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty reported it had made contact with the individual, who said he received $48,000 for his efforts.

When I discussed the "Carlos" admission with a Russophile friend and colleague in 2018 he was puzzled as to why the Russians would bother with such an easily disproved fake. I suggested it was merely a numbers game: when the Kremlin releases a fake like that, it has the capacity to project the story widely via numerous mainstream media channels; but when the fake is discredited some time later there is nowhere near the same resonance in the world media.

Fake stories about Ukraine and Ukrainians were a focus of Russian propaganda long before the Russian-Ukrainian war began in 2014, but they were hardly ever responded to. When the intensity of anti-Ukraine propaganda massively increased in the wake of the Maidan Revolution and 2014 invasions, there arose several Ukrainian initiatives that pushed back.

The current Ukrainian Ambassador to Australia, Vasyl Myroshnychenko, was an international business consultant in March 2014, when he co-founded the Ukraine Crisis Media Center. Since then, it has assisted the Ukrainian government with international communications in the areas of defence, international security, Kremlin disinformation and hybrid warfare. Another initiative was the StopFake media monitoring group established by students and staff of the journalism faculty at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. In addition to these and other Ukrainian organisations, Bellingcat, the British-based international online investigative group has done some amazing work in unmasking Kremlin fakes and is particularly known for its devastatingly detailed reconstruction of the movements of the Russian Army's Buk missile system and crew that shot down MH17.

Ironically, Russia's Russia Today network has "Question more" as its motto. It reflects a fundamental goal of Russian propaganda against the West, which is to discredit the very idea of objective truth. It wants Westerners to question their own mainstream media and then search for alternative realities among conspiracy theorists like QAnon and the Grayzone. In such a world the "alternative facts" presented by Russia Today are positioned to seem like merely another version of events that should be given equal consideration.

Projection is a frequently applied Russian propaganda strategy that has been borrowed from Nazi Germany. Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels describes the concept in Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film of the 1934 Nuremburg Rally, *Triumph des Willens*: "The cleverest trick used in propaganda against Germany during the [First World] War was to accuse Germany of what our enemies themselves were doing." Hence, a fascist Russia accuses democratic Ukraine of "nazism", massively corrupt Russia accuses Ukraine of massive corruption, Russian massacres of civilians at Bucha are presented as Ukrainians "killing their own people for collaboration", and Russia accuses Ukraine of a "genocide of Russian speakers" whilst itself conducting a genocide of Ukrainians in Russian-occupied territories.

Generally, such tactics only work to confuse Western media and public opinion while territories remain Russian-occupied, as is currently the case with the Crimean Peninsula and Donbas regions. Once the occupied territories are liberated, truth *is* found to exist.

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